

INFORMATION

For Whom the Bell Tells

BY DAVE LINDORFF

If you are one of the millions of telephone customers in the United States who is paying for an unlisted number, you may be interested to learn that your number is not so "unlisted" as the phone company has led you to believe. In response to charges made earlier this month in the *Los Angeles Vanguard*, Robert Hart, vice-president in charge of public information for California's Pacific Telephone and Telegraph Company (PT&T), has admitted that every subsidiary in the Bell system has a security department whose "special" agents' sole responsibility is to provide government agencies and officials with unlisted numbers.

Although customers request unlisted numbers in order to protect their privacy, the phone company gives out those numbers, as well as names, addresses, and credit information, to "over 200 agencies," according to Hart. Other phone company sources have said that agencies with access include the CIA, FBI, IRS, and the Drug Enforcement Agency, as well as local welfare and police departments.

Free For The Asking

To obtain unlisted information, an approved agency simply calls the security department and asks for a "reversal" on a "non-pub," which means the number of a non-published phone. In a few minutes a special agent calls back with the information. No court order or subpoena is required, contrary to the claims of phone company representatives in Washington, D.C., and even at PT&T.

Each local phone company has its own list of "approved agencies" to which unlisted information is given. John Whitman, assistant director of security for the New York Telephone Company, says that his company gives it out to "any agency with subpoena power, and there are quite a number of them." He added that this information would also be given to an investigator calling from a pay phone after the identification number was checked with the investigators' headquarters.

"In some states," Whitman explained, "the phone company will give out the name or address on an unlisted number to anyone who provides the

number. They claim that only the unlisted number itself is not to be given out." Policies on such numbers are to be set by each state's Public Service Commission, he noted, "or, lacking that, by the Bell system itself."

Generous Policies

The country's independent phone companies are also generous with their unlisted information. The largest, General Telephone and Electronics (GT&E), based in Stamford, Connecticut, is no exception. Senior Special Agent John Gurak, who heads the security operation for GT&E's Los Angeles office, reported that agents there give it "to any agency with arrest powers."

One private investigator in Los Angeles familiar with the GT&E system responded, "that's a pretty broad statement, since anyone can make a citizen's arrest, and in fact, private security agencies from Pinkertons to Interpol do it all the time."

PT&T's Hart, asked why the phone companies had been keeping their activities regarding unlisted numbers secret, explained, "We've been doing this for years, and no one was ever interested in it." But today, with about one in every four phones unlisted, that "lack of interest" may be over. □

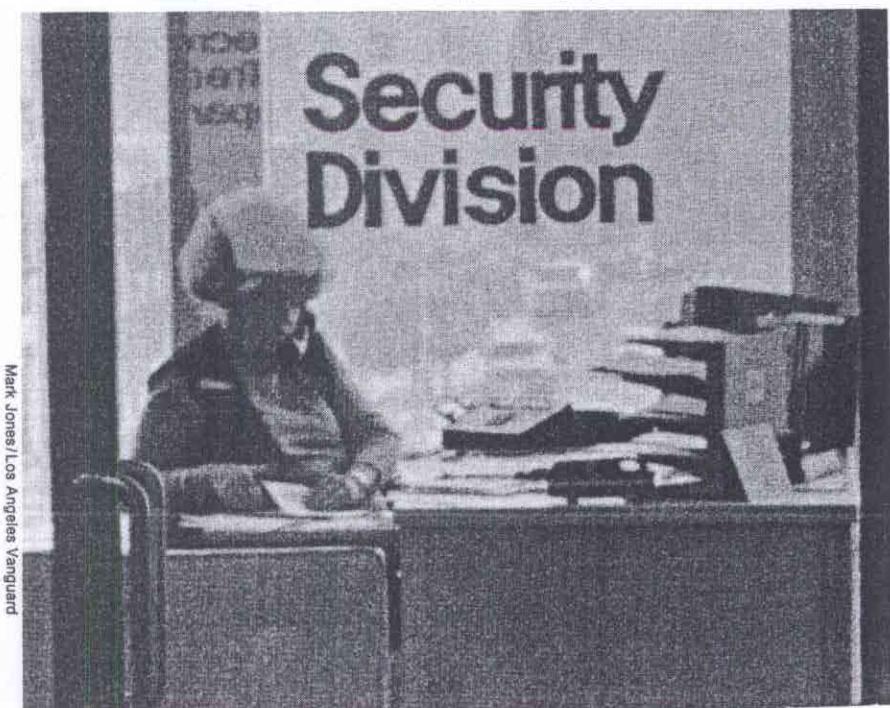
Anyone Can Ask

Objecting to government subpoenas of reporters' phone records, twelve newsmen and four organizations filed suit June 8 against the American Telephone and Telegraph Company and its Washington, D.C., subsidiary.

The plaintiffs, who include reporters Daniel Schorr and Bruce Morton, columnist Jack Anderson, the *New York Times*, and the *Wall Street Journal*, argue that their confidential sources are jeopardized by the telephone company's practice of sending phone records to government agencies. Claiming that such disclosure "drastically curtails" their "ability to gather and disseminate news," they are asking at least five days' notice before any phone records are turned over.

Although the phone company will not itself tell people of a subpoena if the government determines that such notification would "interfere with the enforcement of the law," anyone can ask whether his or her records have been subpoenaed, according to AT&T attorney David Ginsburg. If the answer is no, the company will say so; if yes, the reply will be that the phone company is not in a position to comment. □

Unlisted numbers are one secret the phone company can't seem to keep.



Dave Lindorff is features editor of the *Los Angeles Vanguard*.

Mark Jones/Los Angeles Vanguard